

# Ombuds Insights

Monthly resources to communicate clearly, disagree productively, and connect authentically.



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**Issue 2, April 1, 2026**

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## **Bystander Behavior**

Consider these moments:

- A post-doc is presenting her data, and a peer keeps talking over her, commenting loudly that the study is flawed and that everyone is wasting their time listening.
- When they all leave for lunch together, a nurse tells other nurses that they know the new hire from a previous job, and they shouldn't befriend or include him.
- An attending sees a peer criticizing a trainee using derisive and racially charged terms.
- A key team member is repeatedly left off the emails scheduling meetings on something within their scope and part of their responsibility.

Observing unacceptable behavior presents us with a choice: to be an active or passive bystander. In all these scenarios, anyone in the room can be an active bystander — sometimes called an “upstander” — by addressing the negative behavior, either in the moment or after the fact.

Deciding to be an active bystander can feel challenging. Today, we're seeing the power of standing up to name injustice or wrongdoing. This issue of Ombuds Insights reviews concrete tools for being an active bystander.

## **A Bystander Is a Witness**

Bystanders are people who observe or learn about unacceptable behavior or a problematic situation but are not knowingly engaged in executing or planning that behavior or situation.\* Bystanders may say something in the moment - addressing the behavior with either the person engaging in unacceptable behavior, with the recipient of the behavior, or with the group witnessing the behavior. They may file a report, either using their name or anonymously. Or they may make a conscious decision to do none of these due to the risk that intervening poses to either themselves or the recipient.

Problematic behavior can show up in many ways in an academic healthcare setting. It can occur across the power hierarchy (manager to employee, attending to trainee); across identity hierarchy, with having a marginalized identity compounding the experience; or peer to peer, between faculty, staff, and trainees. The context for such behavior might be in front of patients and/or families, in an office or across Zoom, or in a learning environment. It might occur once or be a regular pattern of inappropriate behavior. Or it might target one person or many people. What ties these together is that there is a witness — a bystander — to behavior that violates the [PRIDE Principles](#) or the [Principles of Community](#).

Let's explore the options, using MIT Ombuds Emerita Mary Rowe's observations from her research and over 40 years of experience as an organizational ombuds.

### **Why Some Bystanders Do Not Act**

A bystander may remain silent for many reasons. Social cues may lead an observer to accept the behavior if no one else is acting or seems concerned. Power differences may convince a bystander to believe the risk of speaking up outweighs possible benefits, especially with references, performance evaluations, or visa status at risk. Seeing others who intervened face retaliation or engage in protracted formal processes without change may discourage a bystander from speaking up. Finally, someone's cultural or personal lived experience may dissuade them from getting involved.

### **Why Some Bystanders Act**

In our office, we hear about people speaking up to support their peers or colleagues. Some bystanders act to address what they see as a violation of expectations about behavior in a professional workplace or learning setting. They describe situations and want help practicing skills or assessing strategies for responding. Others turn to the relevant policies, naming their obligation, given their role, to intervene as a "responsible employee."

In the Office of the Ombuds, bystanders find a confidential, informal thought partner to assess their obligation, the risk, the skills, and the option of engaging as an active bystander.

## Options for Acting

Once a person notices a behavior that goes from “green” to “yellow” or “red,” there are several options for intervening:

Technique	Description	Sample Language or Behavior
Direct (to the actor)	Speaking directly in the moment or afterwards, depending on the situation, the positional power, the relationships, and the seriousness of the behavior.	<p><b>Question:</b> “I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t want to be interpreted as being biased... can you explain that again?”</p> <p><b>Challenge respectfully:</b> “Let’s not talk about a colleague that way. If there are concerns, how can we bring them up to him directly?”</p> <p><b>Follow up afterwards:</b> “I noticed that you referred to the other shift using harsh language, and I wonder if you’d be open to talking about that.”</p>
Direct (to the recipient)	Speaking directly in the moment or afterwards, depending on the situation, the positional power, the relationships, and the seriousness of the behavior.	<p><b>Support in the moment:</b> “Before we move off the topic, I’d like to hear what you were saying.”</p> <p><b>Counteract the slight:</b> “I think you have done really strong work on this.”</p> <p><b>Follow up afterwards:</b> “I noticed that some of the comments directed at you seemed harsh. How are you doing? How can I best support you?”</p>
Distract	Bring up something completely unrelated or change the subject and focus.	<p><b>Pivot/ Interrupt:</b> “Let’s open up the conversation to others.”</p> <p>“I actually have a question about your earlier [unrelated] point, can we go back for a moment?”</p> <p>“I want to be sure we have time to discuss [different topic X], can we move to that now?”</p> <p>“Before I lose the thought, let me just quickly mention [different topic X]...”</p> <p>“Gosh, look at the time, I need to prepare for my next appointment.”</p> <p>“Did you see that email about [unrelated topic]?”</p>

Delegate	Refer the dynamic or situation to someone with more positional authority, if appropriate.	<p>As a “responsible employee,” managers, supervisors, and faculty members in a teaching or supervisory role have a responsibility to intervene and consult or report.</p> <p>“I observed [colleague X] berating [colleague Y] in the hallway about the presentation, and it got loud. It was in front of a group of senior leaders, and I thought you would want to know.”</p>
Delay	Wait, actively.	<p>Reflect on: Was the behavior part of an ongoing pattern, or an isolated incident? Consider the risk of addressing the behavior vs. the risk of not acting immediately.</p>
Document	Log events, whether or not you ever use the details for reporting. Sometimes the act of documenting can help someone from replaying the incident.	<p>Key elements to document are the specific or approximate date of the incident, objective description of the event, names of people who witnessed the behavior, and the impact on you. These can be written in an email sent to yourself, a log on your desktop or on paper.</p>
Reflect	If someone brings up <i>your</i> behavior, demonstrate willingness to listen and consider their point of view and experience.	<p><b>Be curious:</b> “Can you tell me more about this and your perception?” “Is this something you’ve seen me do before?”</p> <p><b>Be willing:</b> Stay open and willing to share your perspective and listen to others’ perspectives.</p> <p><b>Structure:</b> Adopt meeting practices that allow for input from everyone. Set ground rules for the unit, lab, classroom.</p> <p><b>Consider an Apology:</b> If your behavior has had unintended impact, acknowledge the feedback and work to rebuild trust.</p>

Contact the Office of the Ombuds if you'd like a confidential, independent, informal thought partner to assess your options and practice skills, whether or not you're considering being an active bystander.

## Citations and Additional Resources

\*Mary Rowe,  
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[Helping Hesitant Bystanders Identify Their Options: A Checklist with Examples and Ideas to Consider](#)

, " Journal of the International Ombudsman Association (2023).

[Addressing Bullying and Abusive Conduct in the Workplace](#)

[The Anatomy of an Apology](#)

View past issues of the Ombuds Insights Newsletter [on our website](#).



Image: Los Angeles-based artist Chris Johanson assembled colorful nature-inspired shapes to create a stainless steel sculpture that is "philosophical, quiet and promoting well-being by showing our connectedness to nature and the whole of life."

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**Was this newsletter's topic relevant to your context?**



Clicking either response will open a screen where you can suggest your own topic for our next newsletter. Your feedback is important.

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### **How to Schedule an Appointment**

To protect confidentiality, the Office of the Ombuds prefers to schedule appointments by phone or email, and to conduct appointments on Zoom or in person, as electronic communications are not always private.

**For appointments, call:** (415) 502-9600. If we are unable to take your call, we will return it within one business day.

**Office hours:** 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday.

The Office of the Ombuds welcomes everyone, including individuals with disabilities. Please let us know if you would like an accommodation for your meeting. If calling to schedule presents an accessibility barrier, please email our office to schedule: [ombuds@ucsf.edu](mailto:ombuds@ucsf.edu).



### **UCSF Office of the Ombuds**

Office Number: 415-502-9600



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